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Ohio State Engineer

Title: The Corinthian Capital from the Madison Square Presbyterian Church, New York

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Issue Date: Mar-1921

Publisher: Ohio State University, College of Engineering

Citation: Ohio State Engineer, vol. 4, no. 3 (March, 1921), 7-8.

URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/34081>

Appears in Collections: [Ohio State Engineer: Volume 4, no. 3 \(March, 1921\)](#)

The Corinthian Capital from the Madison Square Presbyterian Church, New York

By HOWARD DWIGHT SMITH, '07, *Professor of Architecture*

The recent acquisition by the University of the only remaining column capital from the hexa-style portico of the famous Madison Square Presbyterian Church of New York City, gives the Department of Architecture an interesting architectural fragment, which ought to prove as valuable for instructional purposes as if it were an antique from the Roman Forum itself or from the Acropolis at Athens.



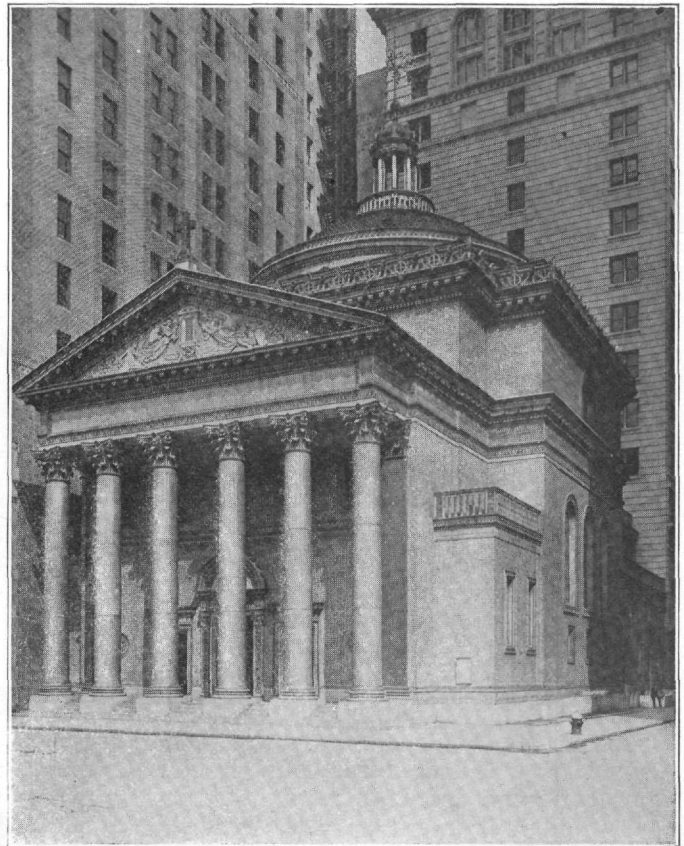
Capital recently acquired by Ohio State

The little story of the acquisition of this capital is only less interesting than the story of the great church from whence it was obtained. Last spring, when I was sent by the Athletic Board to make an inspection of the stadia and athletic plants at Eastern Colleges and Universities, I staid over one week-end in New York City and spent a few hours amongst the haunts of atelier and student days. There was a little *soiree* with old friends in Amiel's basement restaurant, and over a thick steak as of years past, stories of experiences since student days vied with each other in their professional interest and incredulity. "Dutch" Gugler's stories of escapade and adventure stood out alone. As a student Gugler was a ranting, erratic sort of a roustabout, not much as a draftsman, but as full of ideas on design problems and general deviltry as any one might wish. As a graduate he had traveled to Europe on his own resources, had spent a couple of years in Italy and had even made so bold as to seek and obtain an audience with the Vatican to present an elaborately developed scheme for the clearing out of the whole area between St. Peter's and the St. Angelo Bridge for a great plaza and civic center.

This man Gugler now is a sort of "free lance" architect, working now for one and now for another, and executing occasional commissions for

friends, from designing garden ornaments and remodeling barns into studios to painting posters, managing competitions and teaching design. His best story had to do with this incident during the demolition of the Madison Square Church. Our interest in Dr. Parkhurst's old church was quite keen, because of its interesting architectural history and because of the fact that most of us in the party had spent our atelier days practically under its shadow. We knew the history of the Corinthian capitals, which to his horror were being broken apart and carted away in pieces, along with bricks, mortar and building debris, returning to the dust whence they had come. The sacrilege was too great for the little Dutchman, and as the close of the day came, vandalism had claimed five of the six. Gugler could stand it no longer. He put on his hat, went out and over to the structure, and, assuming the authority of a foreman, ordered work to cease. His bidding was heeded and the last cap was safe for the moment, and as the whistle blew calling the laborers to their wine and garlic, he had time to map out his plans for rescue.

With nothing to lose and everything to gain, he took with him into the enclosure about the

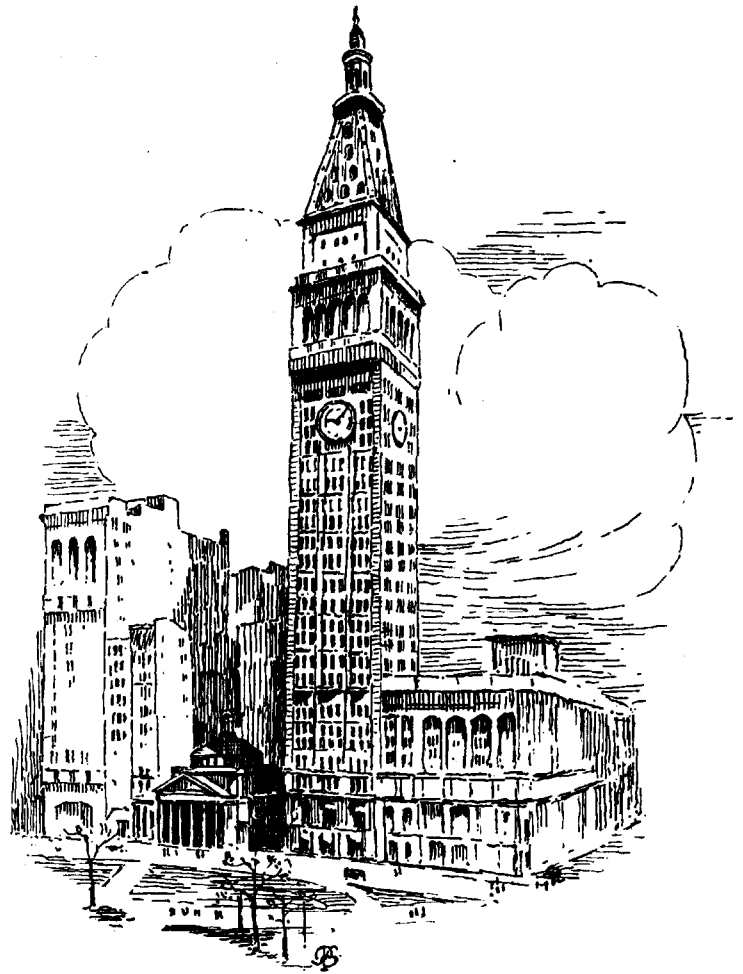


Madison Square Presbyterian Church, New York City

disappearing edifice a gang of stevedores, a team and a truck, and by midnight he had the treasure safely deposited beside his little studio in Washington News. Here the old cap must have felt at home among the studios of painters and sculptors of Greenwich Village. But the thing foremost in the Dutchman's mind, as he finished his story, was the uncomfortable prospect of having to care for the cap and to find an appropriate way to dispose of it. He had not much fear that ap-church and had learned to appreciate it as the handiwork of two great architects, Charles F. McKim and Stanford White. We knew that its predecessor, a goodly Gothic edifice, had been demolished not much more than a score of years ago to make way for the fifty-two story Metropolitan Tower. We knew that the genius of its architects had produced in the new structure not a Gothic affair, whose vertical lines would but be mocked by the contemplated tower, but a sort of Byzanto-Roman structure, small of stature but sturdy of character that suffered naught by comparison with the towering monument to the genius of modern engineering which stood apart but the width of a narrow street. So when Gugler began to tell us of working in Mr. Waid's office in an adjoining building and watching the old masterpiece being dismantled piece by piece, we were all ears and we hung on his words. Every one who appreciated the artistic merit of the church found some consolation that Mr. Donn Barber had arranged for the purchase of most of the materials from the church for the use of a client in the building of the Hartford News. The six great green Windsor granite columns of the portico, the doors, the windows, the terra cotta cornice, balustrades and other details, all save the Corinthian caps were to be used in Hartford. The terra cotta *bas-relief* of the pediment depicting a Biblical scene, was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and transferred thence.

And, so, as Gugler's story went, the old church, (old! on the Continent, it would hardly have been properly dedicated in these two short decades), was being carefully taken down, all save the prehension of his deeds would be followed by anything disastrous. What to do with it was the question. Had it been of stone it would have been invaluable as a well head, or as a garden ornament. But had it been stone this story would never have been told. The comparative meanness of the material of its construction had been sufficient excuse for the violation of the art of a master.

When the story was finished and the brave deed of rescue had been recounted, the thought occurred to me that the men in the Department back home, Professor Bradford, Professor Chubb and Professor Ronan, not to mention others in the University who are interested in classic art, would appreciate the opportunity of having this piece, even though it might partake somewhat of contraband. The bargain was struck. Gugler could not place a price on the work of another, so dis-



Madison Square Church and Metropolitan Building

tinguished a predecessor as Stanford White. I was to have the cap for the cost of transportation and reimbursement for stevedores and truckage.

The cap arrived on the campus on March 1 and now rests temporarily along the driveway in front of the southwest corner of Brown Hall. The abacus (top moulding) is missing and one of the corner volutes is gone. It is composed of thirty-two pieces of glazed terra cotta, assembled and cemented about a light fabricated steel core. The crisply modeled acanthus leaves and volutes are of cream or buff color which contrasts strongly with the deep blue of the bell (or body) of the capital which shows between the rows of leaves. While the capital is essentially Roman in conception and general form, yet the artist has executed his profiles and his foliated detail with a sharpness and depth which is more Greek than Roman, making an ensemble which partakes of Roman sturdiness and of Greek refinement. The presence on the campus of so interesting a fragment, even though modest when compared with great collections of models, casts and antiques elsewhere, will be an inspiration to some students of art and architecture which will well be worth the time and energy and meager expense in acquiring it.